

Romans #18

"God giveth life unto the dead and calleth the things that are not as though they were ..." (Rom. 4:17).

Who are the "dead" of whom the apostle writes in this passage, those dead physically or those dead spiritually? It is certainly a truth that God does give life to those dead physically, but the context of the passage shows that those dead spiritually must not be ruled out. An old rule to determine what a passage means involves taking the context into account in that understanding. Considering that leads to the conclusion that the "dead" in Romans 4:17 are those who are spiritually dead. Paul had stated that the law "worketh wrath" (i.e., brings death, Rom. 4:15) but through the seed of Abraham all nations are blessed (forgiven, Acts 3:25f), thus it is to be concluded that Paul's statement that God "giveth life to the dead" is his assurance to us that those made dead through sin are blessed, forgiven, given life in Christ. Elsewhere we read, "and ye did he make alive, when ye were dead through your trespasses and sins ..." (Eph. 2:1). So, while the "wages of sin is death," we can rejoice that "the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

God "calleth the things that are not as though they were." Earlier Paul quoted God's promise to Abraham "a father of many nations have I made thee" and his statement that God "calleth the things that are not as though they were" is directly related to God's assurance to Abraham that he had made him a "father of many nations" (Gen. 17:5; Rom. 4:17). Yet, when God told Abraham these things, Isaac had not yet been born, his seed had not multiplied, and Abraham did not even have the promised son and grandsons out of which nations would develop! Yet, because God knew what He would do, what He would do was so certain it was as though it were already done! God called the things that are not (but which certainly would be) as if they already were.

This is not the only instance in which God "calleth the things that are not as though they were." Isaiah 53 is another such example. There Isaiah spoke of the Messiah who was to come -- but it would be 700 years before the Christ should live and walk upon the earth. Yet, as Isaiah wrote of Him he spoke of his life and works as there it were an accomplish fact! He "grew up before him as a tender plant." He "was despised and rejected of men." He "was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities." God had "laid on him the chastisement of our peace;" "made his grave with the wicked." All this we say, 700 years

before these things actually happened. Yet the prophet looked forward to that coming in future terms by saying, "*When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin; he shall see his seed ...*" The prophet could write these things which had not yet occurred ("*calleth the things that are not as though they were*") because in God's sovereignty they would occur. Such was certain and sure!

Add to this God's forgiveness of sins in the years before the coming of Christ. God "*passed over sins*" done aforetime, yet spoken of them as "*forgiven.*" Actual forgiveness did not take place until the cross of Christ. Still, because of the certainty of God's purposes for man, God "*called the things that are not as though they were.*" And, so far as those ancient worthies were concerned, their sins were forgiven, did they not repose in death in Abraham's bosom?

So, God "*giveth life to the dead.*" He will ultimately raise all dead but in Christ he giveth life to those spiritually dead. And God "*calleth the things that are not as though they were.*" He told Abraham "*a father of many nations have I made thee*" before the birth of Abraham's appointed heir. Yet, God did make Abraham a father of many nations, most importantly when he blessed all nations through his son and which persons who imitate Abraham's faith, become his "*sons.*"

Jim McDonald